

# UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

## ECOLOGICAL SITE DESCRIPTION

### ECOLOGICAL SITE CHARACTERISTICS

**Site Type:** Rangeland

**Site ID:** R044AB161MT

**Site Name:** Thin Clayey

**Major Land Resource Area (MLRA):** 044A Northern Rocky Mountain Valleys

For further information regarding MLRAs, refer to:

<http://soils.usda.gov/survey/geography/mlra/index.html>

#### **Land Resource Unit (LRU) 44A-B:**

- Moisture Phase: xeric - ustic
- Temperature Phase: frigid, cool - frigid, warm
- Dominant Cover: rangeland
- Representative Value (RV) Effective Precipitation: 14-19 inches
- RV Frost-Free Days: 70-120 days

#### **Site Concept:**

- Site does not receive any additional water.
- Soils are:
  - not saline or saline-sodic.
  - not coarse-granular clay.
  - moderately deep, deep, or very deep with < 15% stone and boulder cover.
  - not skeletal within 20" of soil surface.
  - not strongly or violently effervescent in surface mineral 4".
- Slope is  $\geq 15\%$ .
- Soils do not have a mollic epipedon.
- Clay content is  $> 32\%$  in surface mineral 4".

### **PHYSIOGRAPHIC FEATURES**

The Thin Clayey (TCy) ecological site (R044AB161MT) is located within LRU "B" in MLRA "44A." This ecological site usually occurs on moderately steep to steep hills and lake plains. The slope is  $\geq 15\%$ . This site occurs on all exposures; effect of aspect can be significant in LRU assignment.

**Predominant Landforms:** (1) Hills  
(2) Lake plains

|                                    | <u>Minimum</u> | <u>Maximum</u> |
|------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <u>Elevation (feet):</u>           | 1,800          | 5,000          |
| <u>Slope (percent):</u>            | 15%            | 50%            |
| <u>Water Table Depth (inches):</u> | > 42           |                |
| <u>Flooding:</u>                   |                |                |
| Frequency:                         | None           | None           |
| Duration:                          | None           | None           |
| <u>Ponding:</u>                    |                |                |
| Depth (inches):                    | None           | None           |
| Frequency:                         | None           | None           |
| Duration:                          | None           | None           |

### **CLIMATIC FEATURES**

The dissected Northern Rocky Mountain Valleys of MLRA 44A are considered to have a maritime climate. Precipitation is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year with less than about 35% of the annual precipitation occurring during the growing season in Montana. Rainfall occurs as high-intensity, convective thunderstorms in the spring and fall. Most of the precipitation in the winter is snow or rain on fully or partially frozen ground. Average precipitation for LRU-B is 17", and the frost-free period averages 95 days.

See Climatic Data Sheet for more details (Section II of the Field Office Technical Guide: [http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/efotg\\_locator.aspx?map=MT](http://efotg.nrcs.usda.gov/efotg_locator.aspx?map=MT)) or reference the following climatic Web site: <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/climsum.html>.

|   | <u>Minimum</u> | <u>Maximum</u> |
|---|----------------|----------------|
| <u>Frost-free period (days):</u>                | 70             | 120            |
| <u>Freeze-free period (days):</u>               | 90             | 140            |
| <u>Annual effective precipitation (inches):</u> | 14             | 19             |

### **Monthly precipitation (inches) and temperature (degrees F) distribution:**

|              | <b>Jan</b> | <b>Feb</b> | <b>Mar</b> | <b>Apr</b> | <b>May</b> | <b>Jun</b> | <b>Jul</b> | <b>Aug</b> | <b>Sep</b> | <b>Oct</b> | <b>Nov</b> | <b>Dec</b> |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Precip. Avg. | 1.48       | 1.07       | 1.14       | 1.25       | 1.97       | 2.22       | 1.1        | 1.13       | 1.3        | 1.25       | 1.49       | 1.54       |
| Temp. Min.   | 17         | 20         | 25         | 32         | 39         | 45         | 49         | 47         | 40         | 32         | 25         | 19         |
| Temp. Max.   | 32         | 39         | 47         | 58         | 67         | 74         | 84         | 83         | 72         | 58         | 42         | 33         |

### **Climate Stations:**

- MT245015 Libby 1 NE Ranger STN, Montana period of records 1895-2005
- MT242221 Darby, Montana period of records 1948-2005
- MT248043 Superior, Montana period of records 1914-2005
- MT244558 Kalispell WSO Airport, Montana period of records 1899-2005
- MT242104 Creston, Montana period of records 1949-2005
- MT247286 St. Ignatius, Montana period of records 1896-2005
- MT245735 Missoula 2 NE, Montana period of records 1966-2005

## **REPRESENTATIVE SOIL FEATURES**

These soils are moderately deep to very deep and their surface textures (< 2 mm) range from clay loam to clay, with a clay content > 32%. Their soil structure is weak to nonexistent in the subsoil, which decreases the stability of the site. These soils do not have a mollic epipedon.

### Predominant Parent Materials:

Kind: till and lacustrine deposits

Origin:

Typical Surface Texture (< 2 mm): (1) Clay  
(2) Silt clay loam  
(3) Clay loam

Typical Textural Family: Clayey

|  | <u>Minimum</u> | <u>Maximum</u>  |
|--|----------------|-----------------|
| Surface Fragments $\geq 10''$ (% cover)              | 0%             | 15%             |
| % Coarse Fragments > 2 mm (% volume in surface 20'') | 0%             | 34%             |
| Drainage Class                                       | Well           |                 |
| Permeability Class                                   | Slow           | Moderately slow |
| Depth to Bedrock (inches)                            | > 20''         |                 |
| Electrical Conductivity (mmhos/cm) within 4'' Depth  | 0              | 1               |
| Sodium Absorption Ratio within 16'' Depth            | 0              | 12              |
| Calcium-Carbonate Equivalent within Surface 10''     | 0              | < 20%           |
| Soil Reaction within Surface 4''                     | 6.3            | 8.2             |
| Available Water Capacity (inches)                    | 3.5            | 7               |

## **COMMUNITY PHASES**

### **Ecological Dynamics of the Site**

The Thin Clayey ecological site is characterized by the production and composition of plant species in the Reference Plant Community, which is defined by soils, precipitation, and the temperature regime influencing the site. The presumed Reference Plant Community of this site is dominated by cool-season perennial bunchgrass species, primarily bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) and rough fescue (*Festuca campestris*) with minor components of perennial forbs and mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *vaseyana*). LRU-B occurs in the valleys of western Montana, on rangelands with a xeric and ustic soil moisture phase, a frigid, cool to frigid, warm soil temperature phase, 15-19'' of effective precipitation, and between 70 and 120 consecutive frost-free days annually. This site is characterized by medium-fine to fine-textured surface horizons in soils without a mollic epipedon, and slopes that are > 15%.

The majority of precipitation comes early in the form of snow and spring rain. Summers are usually dry. The growing season is short and cool; primary growth typically occurs between May and July, and dominant plants are those that have adapted to these conditions.

In response to disastrous fires in 1910, new firefighting policies were established. Wildland fire suppression became an important driving factor in the ecology of western rangelands. Livestock grazing during the late 1800s and early 1900s often occurred at very heavy levels. Heavy grazing resulted in a severe reduction in fine fuels, which further reduced potential for natural fires. These two actions altered the natural fire interval.

Fire suppression, along with fine-fuels reduction, has interfered with the natural fire interval; many areas have not burned for over 100 years (Arno and Gruell 1986). Prior to 1900, the average natural fire return intervals were probably shorter than 35 years for this MLRA. Historic fire frequency may have ranged from 15 to 75 years. Trees and non-sprouting shrubs were restricted to small patches or widely spaced plants. Following fire on medium-textured soils, perennial bunchgrasses apparently recovered in a few years and were present to fuel subsequent fires, which suppressed woody species and kept them as a minor component of the community (Arno and Gruell 1983).

Historical records indicate, prior to the introduction of livestock (cattle and sheep) during the late 1800s, elk and bison grazed this ecological site. Evidence shows periodic use by bison in large numbers and concentrations. Forage for livestock was noted as minimal in areas recently grazed by bison (Lesica and Cooper 1997).

Significant livestock grazing has occurred on most of this ecological site in western Montana for more than 100 years (beginning with the 1860's gold boom and subsequent settlement through 1900). Indian horse herds were present and numerous for several hundred years prior. The primary type of European livestock grazed in this region has historically transitioned between sheep and cattle with early grazing (pre-1890) dominated by the cattle industry. In the 1890's Montana sheep production began to increase dramatically (> 400%) and dominated the cattle industry for approximately four decades. By the 1930s livestock production once again favored the cattle industry, which continues to dominate livestock grazing in the region today (Wyckoff and Hansen 2001). The Thin Clayey ecological site is relatively accessible, and many examples were subject to heavy and/or season-long grazing until 1970 or later. Most of the deeper sites within MLRA 44A were plowed and converted to annual crops or tame pasture between 1880 and 1960.

Invasive species are an important part of the ecology of MLRA 44A. Notable invasive species include spotted knapweed (*Centaurea stoebe*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), sulphur cinquefoil (*Potentilla recta*), and cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). Most sites in MLRA 44A are impacted by these invasives. Sites are either currently invaded or have been treated to kill invasives, which can reduce production and change composition of forbs and shrubs. Even where invasives are not present, the threat of invasion drives management of this site.

Although there is considerable qualitative experience supporting the pathways and transitions within the State and Transition Model (STM), no quantitative information exists that specifically identify threshold parameters between grassland types and invaded types in this ecological site. For information on STMs, see the following citations: Bestelmeyer et al. 2003, Bestelmeyer et al. 2004, Bestelmeyer and Brown 2005, Stringham et al. 2003.

Rangeland Health Reference Worksheets have been posted for this site on the Montana NRCS Web site ([www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov)) in Section II of the eFOTG under (F) Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs).

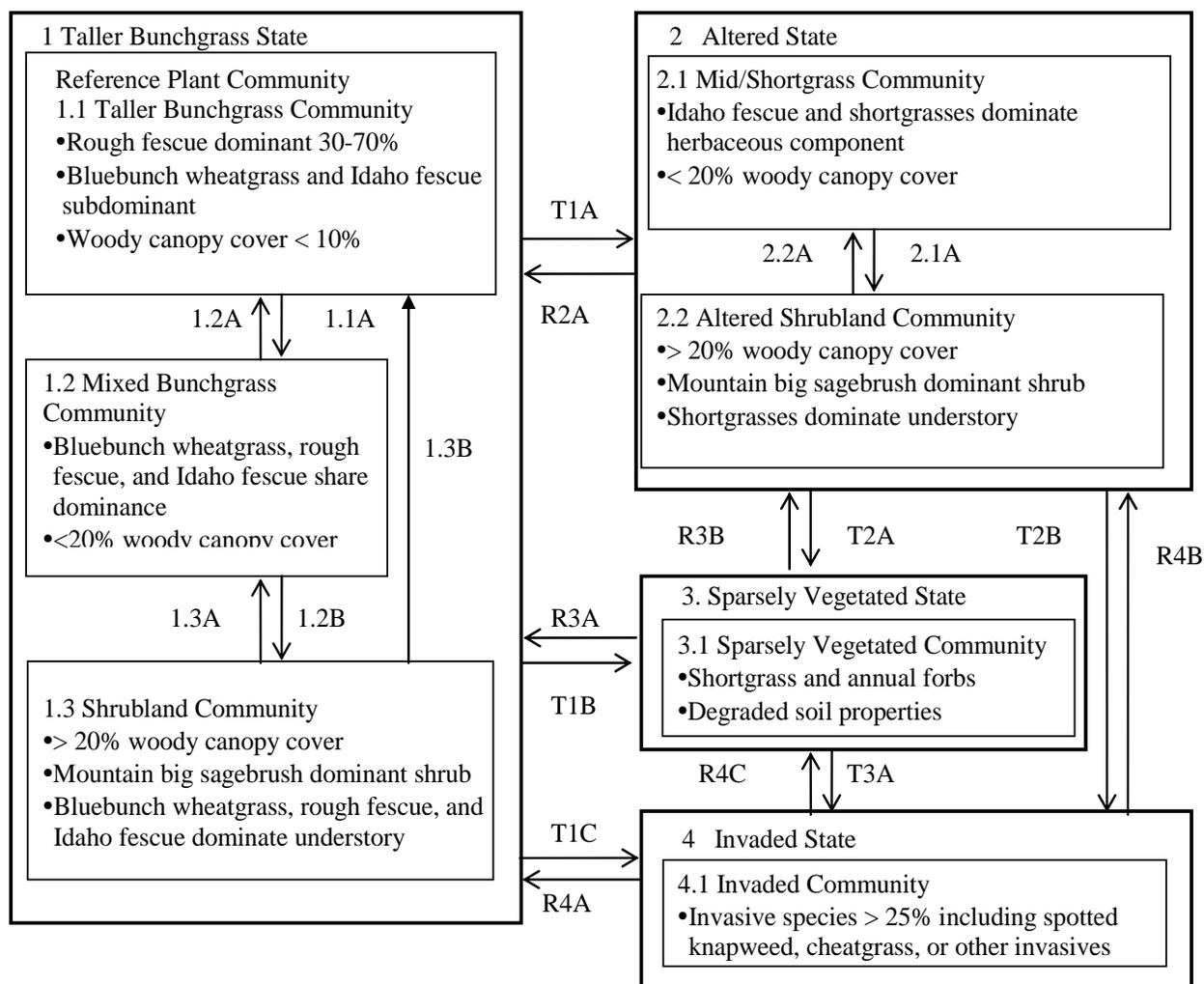
### **Plant Communities and Transitional Pathways**

A STM for the Thin Clayey ecological site (44AB161MT) is depicted in Figure 1. Thorough descriptions of each state, transition, plant community, and pathway follow the model. . This model is based on available experimental research, field observations, and interpretations by experts and is likely to change as knowledge increases.

Plant communities will differ across the MLRA because of the naturally occurring variability in weather, soils, and aspect. The biological processes on this site are complex; therefore, representative values are presented in a land management context. The species lists are representative and are not botanical descriptions of all species occurring, or potentially occurring, on this site. The species lists are not intended to cover every situation or the full range of conditions, species, and responses for the site.

Both percent species composition by weight and percent canopy cover are used in this ESD. Most observers find it easier to visualize or estimate percent canopy for woody species (trees and shrubs). Canopy cover drives the transitions between communities and states because of the influence of shade and interception of rainfall. Species composition by dry weight remains an important descriptor of the herbaceous community and of the community as a whole. Woody species are included in species composition for the site. Calculating similarity index requires use of species composition by dry weight.

This STM includes only native communities and states. The converted communities are described in the Ecological Dynamics section above.



- |      |   |     |  |
|------|---|-----|--|
| 1.1A | Lack of Fire, Improper Grazing Management | T2A | Overgrazing, Soil Erosion                    |
| 1.2A | Fire, Proper Grazing Management           | T2B | Introduction of Weedy Propagules             |
| 1.2B | Lack of Fire, Improper Grazing Management | T3A | Introduction of Weedy Propagules             |
| 1.3A | Fire, Proper Grazing Management           | R2A | Mechanical Brush Management, Range Seeding   |
| 1.3B | Fire, Proper Grazing Management           | R3A | Proper Grazing Management, Range Seeding     |
| 2.1A | Overgrazing, Lack of Fire                 | R3B | Range Seeding                                |
| 2.2A | Fire, Proper Grazing Management           | R4A | Weed Management, Range Seeding               |
| T1A  | Overgrazing, Lack of Fire                 | R4B | Weed Management, Woody Propagules Present    |
| T1B  | Overgrazing, Soil Erosion                 | R4C | Weed Management, Wood Propagules Not Present |
| T1C  | Introduction of Weedy Propagules          |     |  |

**Figure 1.** State and Transition Model: Thin Clayey R044AB161MT

## **STATE 1 SECTION**

**State Number:** 1

**State Name:** Taller Bunchgrass State

**State Narrative:**

This state is characterized by cool-season bunchgrasses and is represented by three communities that differ mainly in the percent composition of taller bunchgrasses and woody canopy cover (predominantly mountain big sagebrush). Forbs are a minor component in this state. Woody canopy cover is < 35 %.

**Photo(s):**



**Community Phase Number:** 1.1

**Community Phase Name:** Reference Plant Community – Taller Bunchgrass Community

**Community Phase Narrative:**

The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) is dominated by taller cool-season bunchgrasses with minor components of forbs and shrubs. Bluebunch wheatgrass is typically the dominant species in the drier end of the MLRA. At the wetter end of the MLRA, rough fescue dominates. Because of the ability of clay soils to chemically bind water to soil particles, this ecological site will have less available moisture in the same precipitation zone than one with less clay. As a result, bluebunch wheatgrass remains dominant until effective precipitation approaches 17 inches. Many common forb species exist on this site, including western yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), twin arnica (*Arnica sororia*), and silky lupine (*Lupinus sericeus*). Shrub species, including mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* ssp. *vaseyana*) and fringed sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*), are present as a minor part of the community.

The Taller Bunchgrass State (1) generally occurs on the Thin Clayey site in areas where proper grazing management practices have been implemented over a long period of time. The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) can be maintained through the implementation of properly managed grazing that provides adequate growing-season deferment to allow establishment of taller grass propagules and/or the recovery of vigor of stressed plants.

The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) in general is resistant to change with proper grazing management, fire, or brush control and near normal precipitation. However, bluebunch wheatgrass lacks resistance to grazing during the spring growing season. It may decline in vigor and production if grazed in the spring more than one year in three (Wilson et al. 1960). Under continued growing season pressure, bluebunch wheatgrass and rough fescue will decrease in vigor. Rough fescue is more tolerant of spring grazing than bluebunch wheatgrass, but will still decline in vigor under continuous growing season defoliation.

The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) is moderately resilient to shrub invasion if properly managed. However if continuous overgrazing does occur shrub canopy will increase and desirable understory will decrease. There will be an increase in less desirable plants such as Idaho fescue, prairie junegrass, and Sandberg bluegrass. When this occurs the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) will shift to a Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2). Once the site becomes dominated by shortgrasses it will transition to the Altered State (2).

Periodic fire increases the resilience of the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) by reducing competition and canopy cover of woody species. Fire also removes decadent herbaceous material, particularly from taller bunchgrasses, which promotes increased vigor and seedling establishment. Timing and intensity of a fire are critical components that can have varying positive or negative effects on this plant community. Fire does increase risk of invasion from invasive species, most notably cheatgrass. At least two growing seasons of rest are recommended to allow for plants to recover after fire.

Without fire and/or brush control, woody species on the site will increase and the site will shift to the Shrubland Community (1.3). This shift can occur with or without the degradation of the herbaceous community from bluebunch wheatgrass dominated to a community dominated by Idaho fescue and shortgrasses. If degradation of the herbaceous component occurs, the site will transition to the Altered State (2).

Because the woody species that dominate in the Shrubland Community (1.3) are native species in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1), the shift to the Shrubland Community (1.3) is a linear process with shrubs starting to increase soon after fire or brush control ceases.

Heavy continuous grazing will reduce plant cover, litter, and mulch. Bare ground will increase and expose the soil to erosion. Litter and mulch will move off-site as plant cover declines. When canopy cover decreases to below 50%, the surface horizon becomes less stable and erosion can occur. This will make it more difficult to reestablish bluebunch wheatgrass plants because of decreased soil fertility.

When overgrazing continues, invasive weedy grass and forb species move into the plant community and the site transitions to the Altered State (2), Sparsely Vegetated State (3) or the Invaded State (4). Until the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) crosses the threshold into the Altered State (2), Sparsely Vegetated State (3) or the Invaded State (4), these degraded communities can be managed back toward the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) using management practices including prescribed grazing, prescribed burning, and strategic weed control. It may take several years to achieve this transition, depending upon the climate and the aggressiveness of the treatment.

While the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) is resilient to degradation under proper management, the community remains at risk of invasion by aggressive non-native species because of the ability of spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, and cheatgrass to invade healthy rangelands and the widespread presence of propagules. Healthy plant communities are most resilient to invasives although many examples exist of well-managed areas that have been invaded by spotted knapweed.

Invasives impact plant communities even if the site does not yet have a critical population of invasives. Almost all reference sites had at least trace amounts of spotted knapweed and/or cheatgrass. It is believed that most sites with only trace amounts have been chemically treated for invasives at some point. These treatments would have impacted other broad-leafed species (forbs and shrubs). It is likely that this site had more potential for forb and shrub production than found on current reference sites. The natural fire regime would have favored an increase in forbs while maintaining shrubs as a very minor component.

Rock cover on the soil surface is minimal and does impact productivity of this site. Plant basal cover is expected to be about 15 to 25%, and bare ground is expected to be between 5 and 15%. The soils of this site have high soil stability values. Soil stability of this site is stable. There should be no signs of current erosion occurring on the site.

The following production figures do not represent the lowest or highest possible production for the Reference Plant Community (1.1). For example, the high figure is not the most production that can occur in a wet year in the most mesic portion of the LRU. These values represent the range of variability for each species across the extent of the ecological site. Usually, values in the low production column represent production at the dry end of the LRU, and those in the high production column represent production at the wet end of the LRU.

Even the most stable communities exist within a range of dynamic equilibrium of species composition. The following table shows an example of species composition; the example is not the only mix of species possible in the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1).

**Species List - Reference Plant Community – 1.1**

**Plant Type - Grass/Grasslike 80% of Community Composition**

| Group Number | Group Name   | Scientific Plant Symbol | Common Name             | Scientific Plant Name          | Annual Production in Pounds/Acre |             |
|--------------|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|
|              |  |                         |                         |                                | Low                              | High        |
| 1            | *Cool Season<br>Bunchgrasses<br>(70%)                            | FECA4                   | rough fescue            | <i>Festuca campestris</i>      | 700                              | 1260        |
|              |  | PSSP6                   | bluebunch wheatgrass    | <i>Pseudoroegneria spicata</i> | 300                              | 540         |
|              |  | FEID                    | Idaho fescue            | <i>Festuca idahoensis</i>      | 100                              | 180         |
| 2            | *Shortgrasses/<br>Rhizomatous<br>Grasses/<br>Grasslikes<br>(10%) | KOMA                    | prairie junegrass       | <i>Koeleria macrantha</i>      | 50                               | 90          |
|              |  | POSE                    | Sandberg bluegrass      | <i>Poa secunda</i>             | 50                               | 90          |
|              |  | PASM                    | western wheatgrass      | <i>Pascopyrum smithii</i>      | 50                               | 90          |
|              |  | ELLA3                   | thickspike wheatgrass   | <i>Elymus lanceolatus</i>      | 50                               | 90          |
|              |  | CAREX                   | sedge spp.              | <i>Carex spp.</i>              | 50                               | 90          |
|              |  | PPGG                    | other perennial grasses |                                | 50                               | 90          |
|              |  |                         |                         |                                |                                  | <b>*700</b> |

**Plant Type - Forbs 10% of Community Composition**

| Group Number | Group Name      | Scientific Plant Symbol | Common Name                 | Scientific Plant Name          | Annual Production in Pounds/Acre |             |             |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|              |                 |                         |                             |                                | Low                              | High        |             |
| 3            | *Forbs<br>(10%) | ACMI2                   | western yarrow              | <i>Achillea millefolium</i>    | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | AGGL                    | mountain dandelion          | <i>Agoseris glauca</i>         | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | ANRO2                   | rose pussytoes              | <i>Antennaria rosea</i>        | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | ARSO2                   | twin arnica                 | <i>Arnica sororia</i>          | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | COUM                    | bastard toadflax            | <i>Comandra umbellata</i>      | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | ERIGE2                  | fleabane                    | <i>Erigeron spp.</i>           | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | ERUM                    | sulphur-flower<br>buckwheat | <i>Eriogonum umbellatum</i>    | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | LIRU4                   | western stoneseed           | <i>Lithospermum ruderale</i>   | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | LUSE4                   | silky lupine                | <i>Lupinus sericeus</i>        | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | ORTE2                   | thinleaved owl's-clover     | <i>Orthocarpus tenuifolius</i> | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | SPCO                    | scarlet globemallow         | <i>Sphaeralcea coccinea</i>    | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | AAFF                    | annual forbs                |                                | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 | PPFF                    | other perennial forbs       |                                | 50                               | 90          |             |
|              |                 |                         |                             |                                |                                  | <b>*100</b> | <b>*180</b> |

**Plant Type – Shrubs and Trees** **10% of Community Composition**

| Group Number | Group Name           | Scientific Plant Symbol | Common Name            | Scientific Plant Name                     | Annual Production in Pounds/Acre |             |
|--------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---|----------------------------------|-------------|
|              |                      |                         |                        |   | Low                              | High        |
| 4            | *Shrubs<br><br>(10%) |                         |                        |   | <b>*100</b>                      | <b>*180</b> |
|              |                      | ARTRV                   | mountain big sagebrush | <i>Artemisia tridentata</i> ssp. vaseyana | 50                               | 90          |
|              |                      | ARFR4                   | fringed sagewort       | <i>Artemisia frigida</i>                  | 50                               | 90          |
|              |                      | ERNA10                  | rubber rabbitbrush     | <i>Ericameria nauseosa</i>                | 50                               | 90          |
|              |                      | CHVI8                   | green rabbitbrush      | <i>Ericameria teretifolia</i>             | 50                               | 90          |
|              |                      | JUCO6                   | common juniper         | <i>Juniperus communis</i>                 | 50                               | 90          |
|              |                      | PPSS                    | other shrubs           |   | 50                               | 90          |

\* When calculating pounds allowable for a plant group, the production for that group cannot exceed the annual production in pounds per acre at the low- or high-expected production for the group--for individual species in a group, the maximum production allowable for each species is shown not to exceed the low- or high-production value depending on the location of this site in that LRU. This means if the site potential is closer to the lower parameters of the LRU (precipitation, soil properties), use the low values as a maximum. If the site potential is closer to the higher parameters of the LRU, use the high values as a maximum. If the site potential of the site is in the middle of the LRU, choose a value in the middle of the low and high as the maximum.

**Community 1.1 Annual Production by Plant Type Table**

| Plant Type              | Annual Production* (lbs/ac) |       |       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|-------|
|                         | Low                         | RV    | High  |
| <b>Grass/Grasslikes</b> | 800                         | 1,120 | 1,440 |
| <b>Forbs</b>            | 100                         | 140   | 180   |
| <b>Shrubs/Vines</b>     | 100                         | 140   | 180   |
| <b>Trees</b>            | 0                           | 0     | 0     |
| <b>Totals</b>           | 1,000                       | 1,400 | 1,800 |

\* Low represents production in a normal year at the dry end of the LRU. RV is the Representative Value for production of the LRU. High represents production at the wet end of LRU.

**Percent Canopy and Ground Cover by Material Type**

| Summary Category   | Low | High |
|--------------------|-----|------|
| Foliar Cover       | 50  | 65   |
| Bare Ground        | 5   | 15   |
| Basal Cover        | 15  | 25   |
| Total Ground Cover | 85  | 95   |
| Total Litter       | 50  | 65   |

**Soil Surface Cover**

| Soil Surface Category | Low | High |
|-----------------------|-----|------|
| Bedrock               | 0   | 0    |
| Boulders              | 0   | 0    |
| Cobbles               | 0   | 5    |
| Duff                  | 0   | 0    |
| Embedded Litter       | 0   | 3    |
| Gravel                | 0   | 5    |
| Visible Lichen        | 0   | 5    |
| Moss                  | 0   | 5    |
| Soil                  | 75  | 85   |
| Stones                | 0   | 3    |
| Basal Hits            | 15  | 25   |

**Plant Growth Curve**

Growth Curve Number:

Growth Curve Name: 44A- Uplands

Growth Curve Description: Includes all upland sites in 44A

| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 0   | 0   | 0   | 10  | 25  | 35  | 15  | 10  | 5   | 0   | 0   | 0   |

**Community Phase Number:** 1.2

**Community Phase Name:** Mixed Bunchgrass Community

**Community Phase Narrative:**

This community is dominated by a mix of taller bunchgrasses (bluebunch wheatgrass, rough fescue) and mid-grasses (Idaho fescue). There may be a moderate overstory of mountain big sagebrush (< 20 percent canopy cover). Rough fescue dominates the wetter end of the MLRA while bluebunch wheatgrass dominates the drier end. Likewise, Wyoming big sagebrush may be more common at the drier end of the MLRA and mountain big sagebrush at the drier end. Idaho fescue will also tend to be increase toward the wetter end of the MLRA. Shortgrasses and shrubs increase in species composition when highly palatable grasses (bluebunch wheatgrass and rough fescue) decrease because of improper grazing management and lack of fire or brush control. Taller bunchgrasses will have lower relative production and lower total production than in the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1). Bluebunch wheatgrass is subdominant. Other subdominant grass species that are more tolerant of grazing are likely to increase include Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*), prairie junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*). Some increaser forbs species may include silky lupine (*Lupinus sericeus*), field chickweed (*Cerastium arvense*), ballhead sandwort (*Arenaria congesta*), northern bedstraw (*Galium boreale*) and pussytoes (*Antennaria spp.*). Fringed sagewort, Woods' rose (*Rosa woodsii*) and common snowberry (*Symphoricarpus albus*) are shrubs that also increase under prolonged drought or heavy grazing.

Heavy continuous grazing will reduce plant cover, litter, and mulch. Bare ground will increase and expose the soil to erosion. Litter and mulch will move off-site as plant cover declines. As long as

the canopy cover remains > 50% and production of bluebunch wheatgrass is > 10% of total biomass production, the site can return to the Taller Bunchgrass Community (Pathway 1.2A).

The Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) and the Shrubland Community (1.3) are “At-Risk” Communities. The transition to the Altered State (2) can occur from any community within the Taller Bunchgrass State (1), it is not dependant on an increase of woody canopy cover, but on the decrease of taller bunchgrass composition to < 10%. When overgrazing continues, increaser species such as Sandberg and native forb species will become more dominate and this triggers the transition from the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Fire and/or brush control can be used to maintain the site in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) as long as taller bunchgrass production does not fall below 10%.

Until the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) crosses the threshold into the Altered State (2), this community can be managed back toward the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) using management practices including prescribed grazing combined with prescribed burning and strategic brush control. It may take several years to make this shift, depending upon weather and aggressiveness of grazing management and brush treatment. Fire can be used to control smaller shrubs and trees. Chemical or mechanical treatment of larger shrubs and trees may be necessary in older stands.

Without any form of brush control, woody species continue to increase in canopy cover. Once woody canopy exceeds approximately 20% and attains reproductive capability, a shift to the Shrubland Community (1.3) has occurred.

**Community Phase Number:** 1.3

**Community Phase Name:** Shrubland Community

**Community Phase Narrative:**

The Shrubland Community (1.3) is characterized by > 20% woody canopy cover with taller bunchgrasses making up more than 10% of species composition. Once woody canopy cover reaches 20%, the site will begin to take on the appearance of a shrubland. Taller bunchgrasses may remain dominant in the understory or share dominance with Idaho fescue and shortgrasses. Without fire, woody canopy cover increases and the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) shifts to the Shrubland Community (1.3). The dominant shrub species is mountain big sagebrush throughout most of the MLRA (Wyoming big sagebrush may be more common at the drier end of the MLRA. The understory will be dominated by a mix of bluebunch wheatgrass, rough fescue, Idaho fescue, and shortgrasses). Other shrub species include rubber rabbitbrush (*Ericameria nauseosa*), fringed sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*), and green rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus*).

The Shrubland Community (1.3) differs from the Altered Shrubland Community (2.2) in the amount of degradation present in the understory. Under proper grazing management, the herbaceous component will be dominated by bluebunch wheatgrass and/or rough fescue. As long as taller bunchgrasses have not fallen below 10% species composition, the Shrubland Community (1.3) can be managed back to the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) using prescribed grazing, brush control, and strategic weed control. It may take several years to achieve this recovery, depending on growing conditions, vigor of remnant taller bunchgrasses, and the aggressiveness of the weed treatments. With improper grazing management, taller bunchgrasses will decline and less palatable

grass species, (such as prairie junegrass and Sandberg bluegrass), and forb species will dominate understory and the site will transition to the Altered State (2).

### **Community Phase Pathway 1.1A**

The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) requires fire and/or brush control to maintain woody species cover below 10%. This community will shift to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) without fire or brush control. Native woody species canopy exceeding 10% indicates a transition to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2). The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) can be maintained through the implementation of brush management combined with properly managed grazing that provides adequate growing-season deferment to allow establishment of bluebunch wheatgrass propagules and/or the recovery of vigor of stressed plants. The driver for community shift 1.1A is improper grazing management in combination with lack of fire and/or brush control.

### **Community Phase Pathway 1.2A**

The Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) will return to the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) with brush control and proper grazing management that provides sufficient critical growing-season deferment in combination with proper grazing intensity. Favorable moisture conditions will facilitate or accelerate this transition. Reduction of the woody component will require inputs of fire and/or brush control. The driver for community shift 1.2A is proper grazing management in combination with fire and/or brush control.

### **Community Phase Pathway 1.2B**

Shrubs make up a portion of the plant community in the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1), hence woody propagules are present. Therefore, the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) is always at risk for shrub dominance and a shift to the Shrubland Community (1.3) in the absence of fire and brush management. The drivers for Community Shift 1.2B are overgrazing and lack of fire and/or brush control. The mean fire return interval in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) is likely < 35 years. Even with proper grazing and favorable climate conditions, lack of fire or brush control for 20 years will allow shrubs and trees to increase in canopy to reach the 20% threshold level. Improper grazing, prolonged drought, and a warming climate will provide a competitive advantage to shrubs, which will accelerate this process. The driver for this community shift is improper grazing management in combination with lack of fire and/or brush control.

### **Community Phase Pathway 1.3A**

The Shrubland Community (1.3) can return to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) or the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) after a fire as long as the understory is able to carry the fire and bluebunch wheatgrass crowns survive the fire and re-sprout and/or there is sufficient seed for taller bunchgrasses to re-vegetate the area.

### **Community Phase Pathway 1.3B**

The Shrubland Community (1.3) can return to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) or the Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) after a fire as long as the understory is able to carry the fire and bluebunch wheatgrass crowns survive the fire and re-sprout and/or there is sufficient seed for taller bunchgrasses to re-vegetate the area.

### **Transition T1A**

The Taller Bunchgrass State (1) transitions to the Altered State (2) if bluebunch wheatgrass falls below 10% species composition. The trigger for this transition is the loss of taller bunchgrasses, which creates a shift in species composition towards lower productive species, especially prairie junegrass (*Koeleria macrantha*) and Sandberg bluegrass (*Poa secunda*). This transition can occur from any community within the Taller Bunchgrass State (1), it is not dependant on an increase of woody canopy cover, but on the decrease of bluebunch wheatgrass production. The driver for this transition is improper grazing management and/or long-term drought leading to a decrease in bluebunch wheatgrass composition to < 10%.

### **Transition T1B**

The Taller Bunchgrass State (1) transitions to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) if plant canopy cover declines to < 25 % and rough fescue decreases to below 10% by dry weight. The trigger for this transition is the loss of taller bunchgrasses, which creates open spots with bare soil. Soil erosion is accompanied by decreased soil fertility driving transitions to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3). There are several other key factors signaling the approach of transition T1B: increases in soil physical crusting, decreases in cover of cryptogamic crusts, decreases in soil surface aggregate stability and/or evidence of erosion including water flow patterns, development of plant pedestals, and litter movement. The driver for this transition is improper grazing management and/or long-term drought leading to a decrease in rough fescue composition to < 10%.

### **Transition T1C**

Regardless of grazing management, without some form of weed management (chemical, mechanical, or biological control) the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) can transition to the Invaded State (4) if aggressive invasive species such as spotted knapweed and cheatgrass are introduced, even if the herbaceous component of the reference community is thriving. Healthy plant communities are most resilient to invasives. Long-term stress conditions for native species (e.g., overgrazing, drought, and fire) accelerate the process. If populations of invasive species reach critical levels, the site transitions to the Invaded State (4). The driver for this transition is the presence of aggressive invasive species.

### **Restoration Pathway R2A**

Restoration of the Altered State (2) to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) requires substantial energy input. The drivers for this restoration pathway are removal of woody species, restoration of native herbaceous species by reseeding bluebunch wheatgrass.

### **Restoration Pathway R3A**

The Sparsely Vegetated State (3) has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) will require reclamation efforts such as soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or revegetation. The drivers for this restoration pathway are reclamation efforts and proper grazing management. The trigger is restoration efforts.

### **Restoration Pathway R4A**

Restoration of the Invaded State (4) to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) requires substantial energy input. The drivers for this restoration pathway are removal of invasive species, restoration of native bunchgrass species, ongoing management of invasives, and proper grazing management. Without maintenance, invasive species are likely to return (probably rapidly) because of presence of propagules in the soil, increase in soil disturbance. The drivers for this reclamation pathway are treatments to reduce or remove invasive/noxious species in combination with favorable growing conditions. The trigger is invasive species control.

## **STATE 2 SECTION**

**State Number:** 2

**State Name:** Altered State

### **State Narrative:**

This state is characterized by having < 10% taller bunchgrasses and < 50% canopy cover. State 2 is represented by two communities that differ in the percent canopy cover of woody species. Production in this state is considerably lower than in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Some native plants tend to increase under prolonged drought and/or heavy grazing practices. A few of these species include Idaho fescue, Sandberg bluegrass, silky lupine, field chickweed, ballhead sandwort, common snowberry, Wood's rose and fringed sagewort.

**Community Phase Number:** 2.1

**Community Phase Name:** Mid/Shortgrass Community

### **Community Phase Narrative:**

The Mid/Shortgrass Community (2.1) is characterized by an herbaceous component dominated by mid-grasses and shortgrasses with taller bunchgrasses making up < 10% of species composition by dry weight. This low density of taller bunchgrasses makes it difficult for them to increase with simply a change in grazing management alone.

This community may or may not have a shrub component with canopy cover up to 20%. If a shrub component is present, it will be dominated by big sagebrush (Wyoming or big, depending on precipitation). The Mid/Shortgrass Community (2.1) tends to occur if the forage component has been degraded but fire or brush control has kept the shrub community to < 20% cover. This community is at risk of shifting to the Altered Shrubland Community (2.2) without fire or other brush control. This shift can be accelerated when improper grazing management occurs. This most often happens when stocking rates are not adjusted to compensate for the decrease in forage production as shrub production increases.

Wind and water erosion may be eroding soil from the plant interspaces. Soil fertility is reduced, soil compaction is increased, and resistance to soil surface erosion has declined compared to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1).

**Community Phase Number:** 2.2

**Community Phase Name:** Altered Shrubland Community

**Community Phase Narrative:**

The Altered Shrubland Community (2.2) is characterized by > 20% woody canopy cover with shortgrasses in the understory. It has the appearance of shrub dominance with a degraded understory. The overstory is similar to the Shrubland Community (1.3) in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Mountain big sagebrush typically dominates the shrub component, but Wyoming big sagebrush may occur in the drier end of the MLRA.

The understory in the community is dominated by forbs and shortgrasses. Failure to adjust stocking rates as shrub cover increases will result in further degradation of the herbaceous community, causing an increase in bare ground between shrubs. This community can have a dense canopy of shrubs with sparse understory making the site difficult to return to the Mid/Shortgrass Community (2.1) or a community within the Taller Bunchgrass State (1), even if brush is removed. Reseeding and other cultural practices may be needed.

When overgrazing continues, invasive grass and forb species move into the plant community and the site can transition to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) or the Invaded State (4). Until the Altered Shrubland Community (2.2) crosses the threshold into the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) or the Invaded State (4) this community can be managed toward the Mid/Shortgrass Community (2.1) using prescribed grazing and strategic weed control.

**Community Phase Pathway 2.1A**

The Altered State (2) is always at risk for shrub dominance and a shift to the Altered Shrubland Community (2.2) in the absence of fire and brush management. The drivers for Community Shift 2.1A are overgrazing and lack of fire and/or brush control. The mean fire return interval in the Altered State (2) is likely < 35 years. Even with proper grazing and favorable climate conditions, lack of fire or brush control for 20 years will allow shrubs and trees to increase in canopy to reach the 20% threshold level. Improper grazing, prolonged drought, and a warming climate will provide a competitive advantage to shrubs, which will accelerate this process. The driver for this community shift is improper grazing management in combination with lack of fire and/or brush control.

**Community Phase Pathway 2.2A**

The Altered Shrubland Community (2.2) can return to the Mid/Shortgrass Community (2.1) after a fire as long as the understory is able to carry the fire and shortgrass crowns survive the fire and re-sprout and/or there is sufficient seed of shortgrasses to re-vegetate the area.

**Transition T2A**

Removal of shrubs without proper grazing management can lead to an increase in bare ground and erosion of the fertile surface horizon and the site can degrade to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3). The driver for this transition is brush management without proper grazing management.

### **Transition T2B**

Removal of shrubs can lead to an increase in bare ground. If invasive species are present, bare ground offers opportunity for invasive species to fill open areas, leading to the Invaded State (4). The driver for this transition is brush management in presence of invasive species.

### **Restoration Pathway R2A**

Restoration of the Altered State (2) to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) requires substantial energy input. The drivers for this restoration pathway are removal of woody species, restoration of native herbaceous species by reseeding bluebunch wheatgrass.

### **Restoration Pathway R3B**

The Sparsely Vegetated State (3) has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Altered State (2) will require reclamation efforts such as soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or reseeding in recommended areas only. If the reclamation efforts are performed without reseeding bluebunch wheatgrass, under unfavorable climatic conditions, or without proper grazing management, the site will return to the Altered State (2).

### **Restoration Pathway R4B**

Weed management without reseeding desirable taller bunchgrasses, favorable climatic conditions, or proper grazing management will lead to the Altered State (2).

## **STATE 3 SECTION**

**State Number:** 3

**State Name:** Sparsely Vegetated State

### **State Narrative:**

The single community described below characterizes this state.

**Community Phase Number:** 3.1

**Community Phase Name:** Sparsely Vegetated Community

### **Community Phase Narrative:**

Long-term grazing mismanagement with continuous growing-season pressure will reduce total productivity of the site and lead to an increase of bare ground. Once plant cover is reduced, the site is more susceptible to erosion. Soil erosion reduces soil fertility creating a reduction in plant production. This soil erosion or loss of soil fertility indicates the transition to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3). The decline may be exacerbated by extended drought conditions.

Very sparse plant cover and soil surface erosion characterize this community. Grass, forb, and shrub cover may be very sparse or clumped (canopy cover < 25%). Weeds, annual species, or shortgrass species dominate the plant community. Perennial bunchgrass species (e.g., bluebunch wheatgrass) may exist, but only in patches.

This community has crossed a threshold (T1B, T2A) compared to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) and compared to the Altered State (2) because of soil erosion, loss of soil fertility, or degradation of soil properties which causes a critical shift in the ecology of the site. The effects of soil erosion can alter the hydrology, soil chemistry, soil microorganisms, and soil physics to the point where intensive restoration is required to restore the site to another state or community. Simply changing grazing management cannot create sufficient change to restore the site within a reasonable period. It will require a considerable input of energy to move the site back to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). This state has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) will require reclamation efforts, i.e., soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or reseeding.

In this community phase there may be a significant amount of bare ground, and large gaps may occur between plants. The transition to this state could occur because of overgrazing (often because of failure to adjust stocking rates in response to declining forage production because of increased dominance of unpalatable invasive species), long-term lack of fire, warming climate, or extensive drought. Potential exists for soils to erode to the point that irreversible damage may occur. If herbaceous cover decreases to the point that soils are no longer stable, the shrub overstory may not prevent soil erosion.

This plant community may be in a terminal state that will not return to the reference state because of degraded soil properties and loss of higher successional native plant species.

### **Transition T3A**

Invasive species can occupy Sparsely Vegetated State (3) and drive it to the Invaded State (4). The Sparsely Vegetated State (3) is at risk of this transition occurring if invasive propagules are present. The driver for this transition is the presence of critical population levels (> 25%) of invasive species. The trigger is the presence of propagules of invasive species.

### **Restoration Pathway R3A**

The Sparsely Vegetated State (3) has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) will require reclamation efforts such as soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or revegetation. The drivers for this restoration pathway are reclamation efforts and proper grazing management. The trigger is restoration efforts.

### **Restoration Pathway R3B**

The Sparsely Vegetated State (3) has lost soil or vegetation attributes to the point that recovery to the Altered State (2) will require reclamation efforts such as soil rebuilding, intensive mechanical treatments, and/or reseeding in recommended areas only. If the reclamation efforts are performed without reseeding bluebunch wheatgrass, under unfavorable climatic conditions, or without proper grazing management, the site will return to the Altered State (2).

### **Restoration Pathway R4C**

If invasive species are removed without sufficient remnant populations of reference community species (particularly rough fescue), a site in the Invaded State (4) is likely to return to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) instead of the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). The driver for the reclamation pathway is weed management without reseeding. The trigger is invasive species control.

## **STATE 4 SECTION**

**State Number:** 4

**State Name:** Invaded State

**State Narrative:**

The single community described below characterizes this state.

**Community Phase Number:** 4.1

**Community Phase Name:** Invaded Community

**Community Phase Narrative:**

The Invaded State (4) is characterized by > 25 % of invasive species: spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, sulphur cinquefoil, and/or cheatgrass are the dominant invasive species in MLRA 44A. Introduced exotic plant species have been identified as one of the greatest threats to the integrity and productivity of native rangeland ecosystems and conservation of indigenous biodiversity (DiTomaso 2000 and Mack et al. 2000). In addition to environmental consequences, damages caused and costs incurred to control invasive plants are several billion dollars each year in the United States (Pimentel et al. 2000).

Invasives are the driving factor throughout western Montana and they are a focal part of the ecology of MLRA 44A. Their ability to take over and dominate a site has become a big concern. Improper grazing management has contributed to the spread of these species.

The potential for altered ecosystem structure and function is high in the Invaded State (4) and can occur in many ways. The increase in invasive species, especially noxious weeds, can lead to reduction of the native bunchgrasses and an increase in the proportion of bare ground, which often results in reduced infiltration rates and increased surface runoff and erosion. Invasion by cheatgrass reduces above and below ground biomass (Ogle et al. 2003), increases plant litter, changes plant community canopy architecture (Belnap and Phillips 2001), reduces soil biota richness and abundance, reduces plant community richness (Belnap et al. 2005), increases wildfire frequency (Whisenant 1990), and potentially facilitates invasion by other noxious or invasive plants. Dense populations of invasive species can cause soil loss to increase because of lack of surface cover (Lacey et al. 1989).

Early in the invasion process there is a lag phase where invasive plant populations remain small and localized before expanding exponentially (Hobbs and Humphries 1995). Based on research conducted in noxious weed-invaded plant communities in Montana, it is reasonable to estimate that 25% dry weight composition of invasive plant species is the point in the invasion process where spread and abundance is increasing exponentially and where a plant community has crossed a threshold (Masters and Sheley 2001). For aggressive invasive species (i.e., spotted knapweed), this threshold could be < 10%. The site becomes “At Risk” as soon as the first individual plant of aggressive invasives reaches reproductive capacity.

Once invasive species dominate the site, either in species composition by weight or in their impact on the community, the threshold has been crossed to the Invaded State (4). Once invasive species such as spotted knapweed, cheatgrass, and leafy spurge become established, they are very difficult to eradicate. Therefore, considerable effort should be placed in preventing plant communities from crossing a threshold to the Invaded State (4) through early detection and proper weed management. Preventing new invasions is by far the most cost-effective control strategy, and typically places an emphasis on education. Control measures used on the noxious plant species impacting this ecological site include chemical, biological, and cultural control methods. The best success has been found with an integrated weed management strategy that incorporates one or several of these options along with education and prevention efforts (DiTomaso 2000).

Production in the invaded community may vary greatly. A site dominated by spotted knapweed, where soil fertility and chemistry remain near potential, may have production near that of the reference community. A site with degraded soils and infestation of cheatgrass may produce only 10-20% as many pounds per acre of the reference community.

Invasive plant species have effective reproductive strategies, long seed viability in the soil seed bank, and/or allelopathic properties (Williamson and Fitter 1996). Spotted knapweed has allelopathic properties whereby its roots exude catechin, which may limit the growth and establishment of other plant species (Callaway and Vivanco 2007; Bais et al. 2002), thus promoting its own success. An in-vitro experiment showed that other weeds like Dalmatian toadflax (*Linaria dalmatica*), kochia (*Kochia scoparia*), diffuse knapweed (*Centaurea diffusa*), and crops, such as wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), showed mortality on the fourteenth day after addition of root exudates from spotted knapweed (Bais et al. 2002). This allelopathic property creates highly resilient communities.

Cheatgrass has the ability to establish rapidly and attain community dominance following disturbances such as wildfire (Young and Evans 1978) or other disturbances that create bare soil. Cheatgrass is a successful invader because it has the ability to respond rapidly to increases in resource availability (Norton et al. 2004 and Lowe et al. 2003) as well as to compete for water (Pellant 1996).

Cheatgrass was introduced into the United States in packing materials, ship ballast, and likely as a contaminant of crop seed. Cheatgrass was first found in the United States near Denver, Colorado, in the late 1800s. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, cheatgrass spread explosively in the ready-made seedbeds prepared by the trampling livestock hooves of overstocked rangelands. Cheatgrass has developed into a severe weed in several agricultural systems throughout North America, particularly western pastureland, rangeland, and winter wheat fields (NRCS 2009). Today, cheatgrass is found in most of the western states having reached its range of current distribution by 1930. In fact, a survey of 11 western states showed that cheatgrass was present on at least 60 million acres (Pellant 1996).

After arriving in 1893 on the San Juan Islands in Washington, spotted knapweed had established in over 24 counties in three northwestern states by 1924, with several large infestations near Missoula, Montana (Sheley et al. 2005). By 1975, spotted knapweed had spread into most of the western counties of Montana, and today it is found in every county in Montana.

Leafy spurge, a native to Eurasia, was sighted in Park County, Montana as early as 1925 and has since been found in every county in Montana. Overgrazing by livestock has contributed to the spread of leafy spurge (Sheley et al. 2005).

#### **Restoration Pathway R4A**

Restoration of the Invaded State (4) to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) requires substantial energy input. The drivers for this restoration pathway are removal of invasive species, restoration of native bunchgrass species, ongoing management of invasives, and proper grazing management. Without maintenance, invasive species are likely to return (probably rapidly) because of the presence of propagules in the soil, increase in soil disturbance. The drivers for this reclamation pathway are treatments to reduce or remove invasive/noxious species in combination with favorable growing conditions. The trigger is invasive species control.

#### **Restoration Pathway R4B**

Weed management without reseeding desirable taller bunchgrasses, favorable climatic conditions, or proper grazing management will lead to the Altered State (2).

#### **Restoration Pathway R4C**

If invasive species are removed without sufficient remnant populations of reference community species (particularly rough fescue), a site in the Invaded State (4) is likely to return to the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) instead of the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). The driver for the reclamation pathway is weed management without reseeding. The trigger is invasive species control.

### **ECOLOGICAL SITE INTERPRETATIONS**

#### **Animal Community:**

Livestock grazing is suitable on this site because of the potential to produce high quality forage. This site may be preferred for grazing by livestock, and animals may congregate in these areas, however if slopes are > 15% and distance from water is too great, livestock grazing will be limited. Management objectives should include maintenance or improvement of rangeland health attributes of this ecological site. Careful management of timing, intensity and duration of grazing to minimize grazing re-growth and providing adequate rest is important. Shorter grazing periods and changing season of use during the growing season are recommended for plant maintenance, health and recovery.

Continuous grazing with improper stocking rates throughout the growing season in pastures year after year will be detrimental, will alter the plant composition and production over time, and will result in a transition to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) or the Shrubland Community (1.3) or potentially hasten a change to the Invaded State (4). Transition to other states will depend on how well the site is managed over time with grazing animals as well as other circumstances such as weather conditions over a period of time.

The transition to the Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) or the Shrubland Community (1.3) can be the result of long-term, continuous grazing and/or repeated critical growing season grazing (early season grazing during stem elongation). This transition can also occur due to a combination of overgrazing and drought. Repeated grazing during stem elongation (generally mid-April through mid-June), can have detrimental affects, especially on the taller key bunchgrass species. Repeated spring grazing and/or repeated and prolonged summer grazing depletes stored carbohydrates,

resulting in poor vigor of key forage plants over time and eventual death of these cool-season grasses – this can lead to an increase in less desirable native species and/or noxious weeds.

The Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) and the Shrubland Community (1.3) can occur across the entire ecological site or can occur in a mosaic with higher and/or lower states. This is most notable in areas that attract additional grazing, such as water sources or salting locations.

The Mixed Bunchgrass Community (1.2) or the Shrubland Community (1.3) is subject to further degradation to the Altered State (2), the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) or the Invaded State (4). Management should focus on grazing management strategies that will prevent further degradation. Forage quantity and/or quality may be substantially reduced compared to the Reference Plant Community (1.1).

In the Altered State (2), forage production is substantially reduced compared to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1). Grazing is possible in the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) and the Invaded State (4), but forage production is greatly reduced in both states. Grazing should be carefully managed to avoid soil loss and degradation of soil properties as well as to ensure adequate livestock health.

Prescriptive grazing should be included in a conservation plan to maintain vigor of key native plant species while targeting the invasive species problem. In some instances, carefully targeted grazing (sometimes in combination with other treatments) can reduce or eliminate populations of invasive species.

Distance to drinking water and slope can reduce grazing capacity within a management unit. Adjustments should only be made for the area that is considered necessary for reduction of animal numbers. For example 30% of a management unit may have 25% slopes and distances of > 1 mile from water; therefore the adjustment is only calculated for 30% of the unit (50% reduction on 30% of management unit). The table below is a general guide for ranches in Montana (Ricketts et al. 2004). Fencing, slope length, management, access, terrain and breeds are all factors that can increase or decrease the percent of grazable acres within a management unit. Adjustments should be made that incorporate pasture conditions when calculating stocking rates.

### **Stocking Rate Adjustments by Slope and Distance to Water on Rangelands for Cattle**

| <b>Percent Slope</b> | <b>Distance to Water</b> | <b>% Acres Grazable</b> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 0% - 20%             | 0 - 1 mile               | 100%                    |
|                      | > 1 - 1.5 miles          | 75%                     |
|                      | > 1.5 - 2 miles          | 50%                     |
|                      | > 2 - 2.5 miles          | 25%                     |
|                      | > 2.5 miles              | 0%                      |
| 21% - 40%            | 0 - 1 mile               | 75%                     |
|                      | > 1 - 1.5 miles          | 50%                     |
|                      | > 1.5 - 2 miles          | 25%                     |
|                      | > 2 miles                | 0%                      |
| 41% - 60%            | 0 - 1 mile               | 50%                     |
|                      | > 1 - 1.5 miles          | 25%                     |
|                      | > 1.5 miles              | 0%                      |
| > 60%                | 0 - 1 miles              | 25%                     |
|                      | > 1 mile                 | 0%                      |

**Hydrology Functions:**

The water cycle functions best in the Taller Bunchgrass State (1) but infiltration is low on the Thin Clayey Ecological Site. The water cycle degrades as the vegetation community declines. High soil organic matter and high total canopy cover of 90% reduces raindrop impact on the soil surface, which keeps erosion and sedimentation transport low. Water leaving the site will have minimal sediment load, which allows for high water quality in associated streams. The Taller Bunchgrass Community (1.1) should have no rills or gullies present and drainageways should be vegetated and stable.

Improper grazing management results in a community shift to the Altered State (2). This plant community may have slightly reduced canopy cover; as canopy cover decreases, soil erosion increases. Therefore, hydrology functions in the Shrubland State (2) are similar to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1).

In the Sparsely Vegetated State (3) and the Invaded State (4) canopy and ground cover are greatly reduced compared to the Taller Bunchgrass State (1), which impairs the water cycle. Infiltration will decrease and runoff will increase because of reduced ground cover, rainfall splash, soil capping, reduced organic matter, and poor structure. Sparse ground cover and decreased infiltration can combine to increase frequency and severity of flooding within a watershed. Soil erosion is accelerated, quality of surface runoff is poor, and sedimentation increases.

**Recreational Uses:**

This site provides some limited recreational opportunities for hiking, horseback riding, and big game and upland bird hunting. The forbs have flowers that appeal to photographers. This site provides valuable open space.

**Wood Products:**

None

**Other Products:**

None

**Plant Preference by Animal Kind:**

This rating system provides general guidance as to animal preference for plant species. It also indicates possible competition between kinds of herbivores for various plants. Grazing preference changes from time to time, especially between seasons, and between animal kinds and classes. Grazing preference does not necessarily reflect the ecological status of the plant within the plant community.

**Legend:**      P=Preferred                      D=Desirable                      U=Undesirable                      E=Emergency  
  
                    N=Non-consumed                      T=Toxic                                      Blank=Unknown or no data  
  
                    Winter (W) = Jan., Feb., Mar.                      Spring (SP) = Apr., May, June  
                    Summer (SU) = July, Aug., Sept.                      Fall (F) = Oct., Nov., Dec.

**Animal Kind: Cattle and Sheep**

| PLANT NAME                      | Cattle |     |     |     | Sheep |      |     |     |
|---------------------------------|--------|-----|-----|-----|-------|------|-----|-----|
|                                 | W      | SP  | SU  | F   | W     | SP   | SU  | F   |
| Green needlegrass               | P      | P   | P   | P   | P     | P    | P   | P   |
| Western wheatgrass              | P      | D   | D   | P   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Rough fescue                    | P      | D   | P   | P   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Idaho fescue                    | P      | D   | P   | P   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Bluebunch wheatgrass            | P      | D   | P   | P   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Kentucky bluegrass              | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Needleandthread                 | D      | D   | D   | D,T | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Sandberg bluegrass              | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Threadleaf and needleleaf sedge | D      | P   | P   | D   | D     | P    | D   | D   |
| Canada bluegrass                | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Prairie junegrass               | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | P    | D   | D   |
| Plains muhly                    | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Blue grama                      | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | P    | P   | D   |
| Buffalograss                    | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Cheatgrass                      | U      | D   | N   | N   | U     | P    | U   | U   |
| Blacksamson                     | N      | D   | D   | D   | D     | P    | P   | D   |
| Prairieclover spp.              | N      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Dotted gayfeather               | N      | P   | P   | P   | D     | P    | D   | D   |
| Milkvetch spp.                  | N      | D,T | D,T | D,T | D,T   | P,T  | D,T | D,T |
| American vetch                  | N      | P   | P   | D   | N     | P    | P   | D   |
| Prairie coneflower              | N      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Wild onion                      | N      | P   | P   | N   | N     | P    | P   | N   |
| Hood's phlox                    | N      | N   | N   | N   | U     | U    | U   | U   |
| Pussytoes spp.                  | N      | N   | N   | N   | U     | U    | U   | U   |
| Wild parsley                    | N      | D   | D   | U   | N     | D    | D   | U   |
| Green sowthistle                | N      | N   | N   | N   | N     | N    | N   | N   |
| Scarlet globemallow             | N      | D   | D   | D   | N     | D    | D   | D   |
| Twogrooved poisonvetch          | N      | T   | T   | T   | N     | T    | T   | T   |
| White point loco                | N      | T   | T   | T   | T,N   | T,N  | T,N | T,N |
| Low larkspur                    | N      | N,T | N,T | N   | N     | D,T  | D,T | N   |
| Death camas                     | N      | T   | T   | N   | N     | T    | T   | N   |
| Winterfat                       | P      | P   | P   | P   | P     | D    | D   | P   |
| Nuttall's saltbush              | P      | P   | P   | P   | P     | P    | P   | P   |
| Prairie rose                    | N      | N   | N   | N   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Silver sagebrush                | D      | D   | D   | D   | D     | D    | D   | D   |
| Green and rubber rabbitbrush    | U      | U   | U   | U   | U     | U    | U   | U   |
| Wyoming big sagebrush           | N      | N   | N   | N   | P     | D    | D   | P   |
| Mountain big sagebrush          | N      | N   | N   | N   | D     | U    | D   | D   |
| Douglas-fir                     | N      | N   | N   | N   | U     | U    | U   | U   |
| Ponderosa pine                  | N      | N   | N   | N   | U     | N    | N   | N   |
| Rocky Mountain juniper          | N      | N   | N   | N   | U     | N    | N   | N   |
| Greasewood                      | N      | N   | N,E | N,E | D     | U, T | U   | D   |
| Fringed sagewort                | N      | N   | N   | N   | U     | U    | U   | U   |
| Yucca                           | N      | N   | N   | N   | D     | D    | D   | D   |

**Animal Kind: Deer and Elk**

| PLANT NAME        | Elk |     |    |   | Deer |     |    |   |
|-------------------|-----|-----|----|---|------|-----|----|---|
|                   | W   | SP  | SU | F | W    | SP  | SU | F |
| Perennial grasses | P   | P   | P  | P | D    | P,D | D  | D |
| Red threeawn      | N   | N   | N  | N | N    | N   | N  | N |
| Annual grasses    | N   | P,D | N  | D | N    | P,D | N  | D |

**Animal Kind:** Deer and Elk (continued)

| PLANT NAME             | Elk  |      |      |      | Deer |      |      |      |
|------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                        | W    | SP   | SU   | F    | W    | SP   | SU   | F    |
| Sedges                 | D    | P    | P    | P    | D    | P    | P    | P    |
| Blacksamson            | P    | P    | P    | P    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| Prairieclover spp.     | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    |
| Dotted gayfeather      | D    | P    | D    | D    | D    | P    | P    | P    |
| Milkvetch spp.         | D    | P    | P    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| Scurfpea spp.          | N    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| Hairy goldenaster      | E    | E    | E    | E    | E    | E    | E    | E    |
| Goldenrod spp.         | D    | P    | P    | P    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| American licorice      | P    | P    | D    | D    | D    | P    | D    | D    |
| Prairie coneflower     | D    | P    | P    | D    | D    | P    | D    | D    |
| American vetch         | P    | P    | P    | P    | D    | P    | P    | P    |
| Hood's phlox           | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    |
| Wild parsley           | U    | D    | U    | U    | U    | D    | U    | U    |
| Green sagewort         | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    |
| Scarlet globemallow    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| Twogrooved poisonvetch | N, T |
| White point loco       | N, T |
| Death camas            | N, T |
| Larkspur spp.          | N, T |
| Winterfat              | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    |
| Prairie rose           | U    | U    | U    | U    | E    | D    | E    | E    |
| Silver sagebrush       | D    | D    | P    | D    | P    | P    | D    | P    |
| Wyoming big sagebrush  | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | P    | D    | D    |
| Mountain big sagebrush | D    | U    | D    | D    | D    | U    | D    | D    |
| Douglas-fir            | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    |
| Ponderosa pine         | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    | U    |
| Rabbitbrush spp.       | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| Rocky Mountain juniper | N    | N    | N    | N    | D    | D    | D    | D    |
| Fringed sagewort       | D    | U    | U    | D    | D    | U    | U    | D    |
| Green sagewort         | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    |
| Plains pricklypear     | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    | N    |
| Broom snakeweed        | N    | N    | D    | N    | D    | D    | P    | P    |

**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**Associated Sites**

| Site Name:   | Site Number: | Narrative: |
|--------------|--------------|------------|
| Thin Loamy   | 44AB162MT    |            |
| Shallow Clay | 44AB131MT    |            |

**Similar Sites**

| Site Name    | Site ID   | Site Narrative   |
|--------------|-----------|--|
| Clayey       | 44AB001MT | This site differs by being on slopes < 15%.                |
| Clayey Steep | 44AB005MT | This site differs by having a mollic epipedon.             |
| Shallow Clay | 44AB131MT | This site differs by having shallower soils (10-20" deep). |

**Inventory Data References (narrative):**

Information presented was derived from NRCS clipping data, literature, field observations (based on one sampled site and observations from numerous others), and personal contacts with range-

trained personnel (i.e., professional opinion of agency specialists, observations of land managers, and outside scientists).

**Inventory Data References:**

| <u>Data Source</u> | <u># of Records</u> | <u>Sample Period</u> | <u>State</u> | <u>County</u> |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Field Data         | 44AB161MT1          | 2008                 | MT           | Lake          |

**State Correlation:**

**This site has been correlated with the following states:**  
Montana

**Authors and Description Approval:**

**Description Date:** May 2009

**Description Author(s):** Synergy Resource Solutions, Inc., W. Lujan, N. Svendsen, K. Walstad, J. Siddoway, M. Hansen

**Description Approval:** Jon Siddoway

**Description Approval Date:** 12/15/2009

**Revisions:**

**Reviser:**

**Revision Approval:**

**Revision Date:**

**Revision Notes:**

**Other References:**

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